

# Commentary

## Personal Renewal

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EDITOR'S NOTE: After John Gardner's presentation on "Self-Renewal" to THE WESTERN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE Editors' Meeting,\* Joseph Murphy, MD, Special Editor for Wyoming, asked the former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, "Where are you in your life's cycle?" Dr Gardner, who is 80 years old, answered, "When Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr, was in his 90s, he was asked a similar question and said, 'I'm like a race horse cantering along after the race is over, cooling down.' Well, I'm nowhere near cantering! I'm still in the race, pushing the world."

John Gardner, who received his undergraduate degree from Stanford and PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, taught at the college level for several years before he joined the Carnegie Foundation. As president of Carnegie Corporation and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, he began to "push the world" toward education and in 1964 received the country's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He has also pushed it toward political reform by founding Common Cause, toward grass-roots political action by founding the Urban Coalition, toward leadership training by founding the White House Fellows program, and toward volunteerism by founding the Independent Sector (a coalition of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations and foundations). His books, including *Excellence*, *Self-Renewal*, *No Easy Victories*, and *On Leadership*, have pushed readers to new understanding of themselves and of organizations and to higher levels of creativity and energy to get important work done. His current research focuses on discovering and defining the characteristics of healthy, vital communities. His call to "keep on keeping on," indeed, to push the world, leads to constructive change. Active people become effective people, infused with the energy and optimism that good hard work inspires. I think you will find this paper as invigorating to read as it was to hear.

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I once wrote a book called *Self-Renewal* that deals with the decay and renewal of societies, organizations, and individuals. I explored the question of why civilizations die and how they sometimes renew themselves and the puzzle of why some men and women go to seed while others remain vital all of their lives. It's the latter question that I shall deal with at this time. I know that you personally are not going to seed. But the person next to you may be in fairly serious danger.

Not long ago, I read a splendid article on barnacles. I do not want to give the wrong impression of the focus of my reading interests. Sometimes days go by without my reading about barnacles, much less remembering what I read. But this article had an unforgettable opening paragraph. "The barnacle," the author explained, "is confronted with an existential decision about where it's going to live. Once it decides . . . it spends the rest of its life with its head cemented to a rock. . . ." For a good many of us, it comes to that.

Some men and women seem to run out of steam in midcareer. You have known such people—feeling secretly defeated, maybe somewhat sour and cynical, or perhaps just vaguely dispirited.

We have to face the fact that most men and women out there in the world of work are more stale than they know, more bored than they would care to admit. Boredom is the secret ailment of modern life. A successful executive said to me the other day, "How can I be so bored when I'm so busy?" And I said, "Let me count the ways." Logan Pearsall Smith said that boredom can rise to the level of a mystical experience, and if that's true I know some very busy adults who are among the great mystics of all time.

I have watched a lot of midcareer people, and Yogi Berra says you can observe a lot just by watching. I have concluded that most people enjoy learning and growing. And many are clearly troubled by the self-assessments of midcareer.

Such self-assessments are no great problem when you are young and moving up. The drama of your own rise is enough. But when you reach middle age, when your energies are not what they used to be, then you will begin to wonder what it all added up to, you will begin to look for the figure in the carpet of your life. I have some simple advice for you when you begin that process. Don't be too hard on yourself. Look ahead. Someone said that "Life is the art of drawing without an eraser." And above all, do not imagine that the story is over. Life has a lot of chapters.

I said in *Self-Renewal* that we build our own prisons and serve as our own jailkeepers. I no longer completely agree with that. I still think we are our own jailkeepers, but I have concluded that our parents and the society at large have a hand in building our prisons. They create roles for us—and self-images—that hold us captive for a long time. The person intent on self-renewal will have to deal with ghosts of the past—the memory of earlier failures, the remnants of childhood dramas and rebellions, and the accumulated grievances and resentments that have long outlived their cause. Sometimes people cling to the ghosts with something almost approaching pleasure—but the hampering effect on growth is inescapable.

The more I see of human lives, the more I believe the business of growing up is much longer drawn out than we pretend. If we achieve it in our 30s, even our 40s, we are doing well. To those of you who are parents of teenagers, I

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can only say, "Sorry about that." For this generation of kids, the rule is, "Out of the house by 40."

There's a myth that learning is for young people. But as the proverb says, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts." The middle years are great, great learning years. Even the years past the middle years. I took on a new job after my 77th birthday—and I'm still learning.

It's a good idea to pause occasionally for an *inward* look. By midlife most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves. Sooner or later you have to come to terms with yourself. You have to grasp what S. N. Behrman meant when he said, "At the end of every road you meet yourself." You may not get rid of all of your hang-ups, but you learn to control them to the point that you can function productively and not hurt others.

You have to come to understand your impact on others. It's interesting that even in the first year of life you learn the impact that a variety of others have on you, but as late as middle age many people have a very imperfect understanding of the impact they have on others. The hostile person keeps asking, "Why are people so hard to get along with?"—never reflecting on the fact that he's creating his own environment. In some measure we all create our own environments. You may not yet grasp the power of that truth to change your life.

Of course, failures are a part of the story, too. Everyone fails. Joe Louis said, "Everyone has to figure to get beat some time." The question is not did you fail but did you pick yourself up and move ahead? And there is one other little question: "Did you collaborate in your own defeat?" A lot of people do. Learn not to.

But there is something I know about you that you may or may not know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped, more talent than has ever been exploited, more strength than has ever been tested, more to give than you have ever given.

You know about some of the gifts that you have left undeveloped. Would you believe that you have gifts and possibilities you don't even know about? It's true.

It isn't possible to talk about renewal without touching on the subject of motivation. Someone defined horse sense as the good judgment horses have that prevents them from betting on people. But we have to bet on people—and I place my bets more often on high motivation than on any other quality except judgment. There is no perfection of techniques that will substitute for the lift of spirit and heightened performance that comes from strong motivation. The world is moved by highly motivated people, by enthusiasts, by men and women who want something very much or believe very much.

The nature of one's personal commitments is a powerful element in renewal, so let me say a word on that subject.

I once lived in a house where I could look out a window as I worked at my desk and observe a small herd of cattle browsing in a neighboring field. And I was struck by a thought that must have occurred to the earliest herdsman tens of thousands of years ago. You never get the impression that a cow is about to have a nervous breakdown. Or is puzzling about the meaning of life.

Humans have never mastered that kind of complacency. We are worriers and puzzlers, and we want meaning in our lives. I am not speaking idealistically; I am stating a plainly observable fact about men and women. It's a rare person who can go through life like a homeless alley cat, living from day

to day, taking its pleasures where it can, and dying unnoticed.

That is not to say that we have not all known a few alley cats. But it is not the norm. It just is not the way we are built.

For many this life is a vale of tears; for no one is it free of pain. But we are so designed that we can cope with it if we can live in some context of meaning. Given that powerful help, we can draw on the deep springs of the human spirit, to see our suffering in the framework of all human suffering, to accept the gifts of life with thanks and endure life's indignities with dignity.

We tend to think of youth and the active middle years as the years of commitment. As you get a little older, you are told you have earned the right to think about yourself. But that is a deadly prescription! People of every age need commitments beyond the self, need the meaning that commitments provide. Self-preoccupation is a prison, as every self-absorbed person finally knows. Commitments to larger purposes can get you out of prison.

Another significant ingredient in motivation is one's attitude toward the future. Optimism is unfashionable today, particularly among intellectuals. Everyone makes fun of it. Someone said, "Pessimists got that way by financing optimists." But I am not pessimistic and I advise you not to be. As the fellow said, "I'd be a pessimist but it would never work."

I can tell you that for renewal, a tough-minded optimism is best. The future is not shaped by people who do not believe in the future. Men and women of vitality have always been prepared to bet their futures, even their lives, on ventures of unknown outcome. If they had all looked before they leaped, we would still be crouched in caves sketching animal pictures on the wall.

But I did say tough-minded optimism. High hopes that are dashed by the first failure are precisely what we do not need. We have to believe in ourselves, but we must not suppose that the path will be easy. It's tough. Life is painful, and rain falls on the just, and Mr Churchill was not being a pessimist when he said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." He had a great deal more to offer, but as a good leader he was saying it was not going to be easy. He was also saying something that all great leaders say constantly—that failure is simply a reason to strengthen resolve.

We cannot dream of a utopia in which all arrangements are ideal and everyone is flawless. Life is tumultuous—an endless losing and regaining of balance, a continuous struggle, never an assured victory.

Nothing is ever finally safe. Every important battle is fought and re-fought. We need to develop a resilient, indomitable morale that enables us to face those realities and still strive with every ounce of energy to prevail. You may wonder if such a struggle—endless and of uncertain outcome—is more than humans can bear. But all of history suggests that the human spirit is well fitted to cope with just that kind of world.

Remember I mentioned earlier the myth that learning is for young people. I want to give you some examples to counter the myth. In a piece I wrote for *The Reader's Digest* not long ago, I gave what seemed to me a particularly interesting true example of renewal. The man in question was 53 years old. Most of his adult life had been a losing struggle against debt and misfortune. In military service he received a battlefield injury that denied him the use of his left arm. He was also seized and held in captivity for five years. Later he held two government jobs, succeeding at neither. At 53 he

was in prison—and not for the first time. Would you bet on this man? You can see all the personnel directors you have ever known shaking their heads gloomily. But there in prison, he decided to write a book, driven by heaven knows what motive—boredom, the hope of gain, emotional release, creative impulse—who can say? And the book turned out to be one of the greatest ever written, a book that has enthralled the world for over 350 years. The prisoner was Cervantes; the book, *Don Quixote*.

Another example is Pope John XXIII, a serious man who found a lot to laugh about. The son of peasant farmers, he once said, “In Italy there are three roads to poverty—drinking, gambling, and farming. My family chose the slowest of the three.” When someone asked him how many people worked in the Vatican, he said, “Oh, about half.” He was 76 years old when he was elected Pope. Through a lifetime in the bureaucracy, the spark of spirit and imagination had remained undimmed, and when he reached the top he launched the most vigorous renewal that the Catholic Church has known in this century.

Still another example is Winston Churchill. At age 25, as a correspondent in the Boer War, he became a prisoner of war, and his dramatic escape made him a national hero. Elected to Parliament at 26, he performed brilliantly, held high cabinet posts with distinction, and at 37 became First Lord of the Admiralty. Then he was discredited, unjustly, I believe, by the Dardanelles expedition—the defeat at Gallipoli—and lost his admiralty post. There followed 24 years of ups and downs. All too often the verdict on him was, “Brilliant but erratic . . . not steady, not dependable.” He had only himself to blame. A friend described him as a man who jaywalked through life. He was 66 before his moment of flowering came. Someone said, “It’s all right to be a late

bloomer if you don’t miss the flower show.” Churchill did not miss it.

From those examples I have given, I hope it is clear that the door of opportunity does not really close as long as a person is reasonably healthy. The question is what lies ahead. A person may not go to jail and write a novel, or become Pope. But as long as the spirit is undimmed, new and rich patterns of meaning in life can be created as you grow older.

Many years ago in a speech to high school graduates, I concluded with a paragraph on the meaning in life. The speech was reprinted over the years, and 15 years later that final paragraph came back to me in a rather dramatic way, really a heartbreaking way.

A man wrote to me from Colorado saying that his 20-year-old daughter had been killed in an auto accident some weeks before and that she was carrying in her billfold a paragraph from a speech of mine. He said he was grateful because the paragraph—and the fact that she kept it close to her—told him something he might not otherwise have known about her values and concerns. I cannot imagine where or how she came across the paragraph, but here it is.

*Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.*